Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE QUEST FOR ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY[1]

L. P. JACKS

MANCHESTER COLLEGE, OXFORD

What is absolute certainty? Where is it to be found? Does it exist? Is there any belief of mankind which can be claimed as absolutely certain?

It is difficult to define an absolute in any kind. One can only say that the absolute is that which wants nothing to make it complete. The absolute does not even want a philosopher to tell the world what the absolute is. So long as it wants a philosopher to expound it, to that extent it is not complete, and is therefore not the absolute.

Spinoza saw this, and made it the corner-stone of his thought. He saw that Perfection must be capable of telling its own story. It cannot at one and the same time be perfect and yet in need of a human spokesman to explain it. A dumb absolute which needs you to give it a tongue, an unintelligible absolute which needs you to make it rational, a dead absolute which needs you to make it live and interesting, would be no absolute at all. So Spinoza begins his great treatise with admirable humility by defining God as the being who defines himself; who, just because he is all-perfect, needs no explainer, being fully competent to explain himself. God asks for no champions; wants no apologist; seeks for no witnesses. If he did, he would not be God. But Spinoza went too far.

Among those whom I am now addressing there are many who might be called, without extravagance, the champions of God. They have taken upon themselves vows which justify me in so describing them. The world recognizes them in that character, and with a certain "high humility" they so recognize themselves. It is pretty plain therefore that the God whom you serve is not the Absolute in the strict sense of the term. If he were, he would

[1] An address delivered before the Provincial Assembly of Non-subscribing Ministers of Lancashire and Cheshire, England.

not need your championship, and your occupation would be gone. An Absolute who needs nothing cannot need *you.*

Let us apply this to the question of absolute certainty. What do we mean by the words? An absolute certainty, if it is strictly absolute, will be insusceptible of further attestation. The process of verifying it is complete. Being complete, all further witness on its behalf is a work of supererogation. Being absolute it has passed the point where doubt can assail the truth. Being perfect it has got rid of all the germs which would lead to its disappearance or decay. Nothing that you can do, nothing that you can say, will make it more certain than it is; for a truth which is in danger of perishing or capable of becoming yet more certain cannot be absolutely certain.

Why, then, do you propose to enter your pulpits next Sunday for the purpose of bearing further witness on behalf of your faith? You may answer, "Unless I were absolutely certain of my faith I should not bear witness to it." Granted. But if *it* were absolutely certain, everybody else would be in the same condition as you are, and your office next Sunday would be a mere mission to the converted.

I infer, therefore, that the truths to which you are all bearing witness are not absolute certainties in the strict sense of the term. Risks still attend them which it is your office to meet. Doubts assail them which it is your office to ward off. They lack something of their full manifestation and convincingness, which it is your office to make good. And you love these truths for that very reason, though not for that reason alone. Just as a mother's love for her child is partly rooted in the knowledge that the child needs her for its sustenance and for its development into a full-grown man, so your love for these highest truths, your very devotion to them, is partly rooted in your knowledge that they need you for their witness, and without you cannot be made perfect. And just as there is no more tragic moment in a mother's life than that when she realizes that her first-born needs her no longer, so it would be a tragic moment in your life if truth declared itself independent of your testimony.

However widely our views of truth may differ in detail, on one point at all events we are likely to be agreed. Truth in its total-

ity is not a fixed quantity but a growing organism. It is always passing on into a future which is richer and fuller than the past. Not all parts of the kingdom of truth grow at an equal rate. Some portions are relatively stable, others are relatively fluid. Thinking of the whole kingdom as a circle, we might say that the centre is occupied by the mathematical sciences; next to these come the sciences of nature; from them you pass to the science of man, until at last you reach the highest and subtlest form of truth, which is the science of God. Here you reach the very growing point of truth. The theologian stands at that point. He, less than any other, is entitled to treat the truth as something which lies neatly packed within the four rigid corners of any formula. He more than any other must be careful to state the truth, in forms which admit of further development. He must leave the way open for the more which is yet to come. If he fails to do so, he will deprive truth of the chief interest it has at the point where he handles it. And for that reason he must beware how he affixes the word "absolute" to the certainty which he seeks, or professes. A certainty whose very nature is to grow ever more certain, a certainty which needs him to aid in its enrichment, cannot be called absolute, unless the term is used in a purely subjective sense.

Now it cannot be denied that plenty of certainties exist which it is practically impossible for any human mind to doubt. I say practically, and by that I mean that nobody could act upon the doubts he might choose to profess. If he had to do so, he would be destroyed, and his destruction would be an element in the proof that he was wrong. But theoretical doubt is always possible. There is no truth either of science or common sense which cannot be theoretically placed in question by a person who is determined to question it. Many so-called unquestionable truths owe their air of finality to the fact that nobody, or scarcely anybody, does question them. But granted the will to raise questions, and there is not an axiom of logic or of science which might not be put upon its trial. Absolute in the sense of being forever exempt from the possibility of cavil none of them are or ever can be. "Two and two make four," you say. To which the caviller replies, "Two drops of water added to two drops of water do not make four

drops, but one drop four times as big as each of the constituents." "The angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles," you say. "There is no such thing as a triangle," answers the caviller, "there is only this triangle or that triangle, and if you put this or that triangle under a microscope, you will find inequalities in its angles which invalidate your conclusion." And in general it requires no great ingenuity to show that the alleged absolute certainties of mathematics are artificial. They assume the constitution of the human mind to begin with, and you have only to suggest that other minds may be differently constituted and the absoluteness of mathematical truth vanishes. Mathematics is like a game played according to certain rules or conventions. These rules or conventions—conventions as to the nature of space and the nature of number—can always be called in question by anyone who has a mind to do so; and when questioned all the results which follow from obeying them are seen to be hypothetical. Now such questioning is perfectly safe so long as it leads to nothing but argument. But act upon your doubts, and swift repentance will follow.

Or take what one may call the primal certainty of life. I mean the belief a man has in his own identity. There is nothing of which I am so sure as I am of my personal identity, and yet there is nothing I am less able to prove if challenged for a proof. There is nothing, moreover, about which I could raise so many doubts myself, were I determined to raise them. How, for instance, can I make it absolutely certain that I, who am delivering this lecture, am identically the same person as he who received the invitation to deliver it three months ago? I may be under an illusion. I may have been dreaming. An evil spirit may have deluded me. Perhaps I am the wrong man. "But no," you reply, "the committee who invited you are here to testify that you are the man they invited. And the audience is here to support their testimony." I answer, How do I know that the committee are not the wrong men? Before their testimony can make me absolutely sure of my identity, they must be absolutely sure of their own. Perhaps the committee is under an illusion. Perhaps the audience is composed of people who are not the people they think they are. Whatever reason I have for doubting my own

identity, they have equal reasons for doubting theirs; and either party must beg the whole question before it can accept the testimony of the other. How then can we make sure that we are not all in Bedlam together? We cannot make it sure by any manner of means. But why? The answer is simple,—we cannot make it sure, simply because it is sure already. No one who was really and utterly in Bedlam would ever raise the question whether he was there or not. Be that as it may, the instance is interesting because it shows how much easier it is to raise doubts concerning our primal certainties than to give proofs of them. Provided you *choose* to raise them, provided you are determined to raise them, the scope for doubt is simply limitless. But what difference do the doubts make to our certainty? Not one iota. Our inability to solve the conundrums I have just suggested leaves our belief in identity untouched. Nay, I go further. Were some heaven-born philosopher to appear on the instant and present us with an irrefragable proof that we are the men we think ourselves to be, we should tell that philosopher that he had brought coals to Newcastle, we should be unmoved by his logic, we should go away not one whit surer of our personal identity than we were before the proof was offered. Possibly the proof might work in the opposite direction. Our belief in our personal identity, we might feel, loses something of its security by being made to rest on an argument. The argument may be good, but on the whole we prefer the grounds on which we believed before the argument was given. I am reminded of a saying attributed to Samuel Greg. He could always believe, he said, in the immortality of the soul, except when he was listening to arguments in defence of it. And I imagine there are quite a number of important beliefs which are all the more secure when we refrain from defending them. In the intimacy of personal relationships we entertain beliefs concerning the character and fidelity of those we love which certainly would gain nothing by being made the subject of an argument. They are rooted in the silence, and would actually lose something of their cogency if we tried to justify them before the public. We resent the notion of putting them to the test of argument, rightly feeling that such a proposal is itself an act of treachery.

We are now in a position to give a summary answer to the question with which we began: Where is absolute certainty to be found? The answer is, Nowhere. And the answer may be given with entire lightness of heart. There is no need to make a long face over it, as though some cherished ideal were being abandoned. Absolute certainty is, for beings constituted as we are, simply a meaningless phrase,—a phrase which expresses no human ideal, which represents nothing we cherish and nothing that we suffer by giving up. A truth so certain as to stand in need of no further witness; a truth so accurately stated that a finer accuracy is unattainable; a truth so utterly proved that no ingenuity of man can raise a doubt against it; a truth so indubitable as to defeat the perverseness which is determined to question it; a truth so rich that a fuller enrichment is impossible; a truth so self-sufficient as to call for no champions, no defenders, no prophets, apostles, and martyrs,—truth absolute in that sense never has had and never can have the slightest interest for any human being. Were truth of that kind to arrive upon the earth, the mind of man would simply be put out of commission, and the curtain would fall irrevocably on the drama of human life. The one instance in which we seem to have attained this absolute certainty—the science of measurement and number—is not a real exception. We attain finality in these sciences only because we agree in advance to discount everything which would prevent our doing so. That is the rule of the game. But the rule is not applicable to any concrete reality of human life and is wholly impossible in all reasoning on the things of the spirit. When the geometrician informs us that the triangle whose properties he has proved to be such and such, is not any actual triangle as drawn by a human hand, but an abstract triangle drawn by the pure intelligence, his statement is at once accepted as in harmony with the rules of the game. But what should we say to a philosopher or theologian who should tell us that the man whom he has proved to be immortal and free, is not any concrete Smith, Brown, or Robinson, but an abstract man, who is neither Smith nor Brown nor Robinson, nor anybody else in particular? We should reply at once that he has answered a question in which we have no interest, and failed to answer the question we origi-

nally asked. We should say that whether or no there be such a thing as an abstract triangle, there is certainly no such being as an abstract man. Nor should we be greatly reassured if this philosopher were to reply that by proving man in the abstract to be immortal, he had proved man in the concrete to be not far short of immortality, not far short of free, not far short of a child of God. This, we should say, is nonsense. In short, may we not say, without further laboring the point, that certainties so established have no application in the field with which we are here concerned. The process of making them absolute, the process of abstraction, has the unfortunate effect of making them worthless. We let them go therefore without a sigh. We are abandoning no ideal. We are declaring no skepticism. We are merely arming ourselves against the disastrous mistake made by the hunters of the snark, who, you may remember, set out on their famous enterprise without first inquiring whether there was a snark to hunt, only to find in the end that the animal they had made such elaborate preparations to catch was not a snark but a boojum.

And now let me call your attention to a paradox which rears its head in a very sudden and startling fashion at the present point of the discussion. If there are in this audience, as surely there must be, persons with a turn for dialectics, they will have perceived this paradox and be ready to use it as a means of convicting me out of my own mouth. The paradox is this. In my efforts to get rid of this bogey—I will not call it an ideal—of absolute certainty, I seem oddly enough to have stumbled by accident and in spite of myself on something which upon the face of it looks as though it were absolutely certain. Have I not committed myself, with perhaps an excessive air of dogmatism, to certain unequivocal propositions concerning the nature of truth? Have I not said that the nature of truth is such that it stands in need of a perpetual witness? Have I not said that truth lives in the living witness which is borne; that no truth can be considered absolutely certain so long as it can be made more certain, or even more illustrious, by the testimony of your life or mine? Yes, I have said all this; and because it happens to be the basis of my convictions, and because also

I have learned not to be afraid of dialectical traps, I desire to say it again and to say it with all the emphasis I can command. I repeat, then, that truth in its essence is not a theorem but a Cause; a cause forever sacred, and forever incompletely victorious; forever needing such service as I can render, and for that very reason far dearer than if it were independent of me. I go further. In thus defining truth I am introducing a whole philosophy of life. Who and what is man? He is a witness to the truth. Bearing testimony sums up the end, the fundamental business, of his life. For this cause he came into the world. I speak to many who have taken upon them the office of minister of the Word. The Word needs your ministrations to complete its work; otherwise you would not be what you are. But in being what you are you have only made explicit what is implicit in the office of every man. All ages, all races, are involved in the task of bearing witness. History in its manifold and endless phases, whatever is tragic, whatever is victorious, whatever is fiercely combative, or calmly expectant, or submissively resigned in the chequered life of the ages—the truth needs it all as testimony, and needs ever more to the end of time. Great is the company of the preachers. All nature is involved; the whole universe is confederate. So that you who have vowed yourselves to the service of Truth have grappled to the central purpose of the world; you have hitched your wagon to the stars; you are marching in step with the cosmic forces; the ark of the testimony goes before you; and there is not a flower by the wayside, nor a bird singing among the branches, but wishes you god-speed as you pass.

Well, here are statements enough—enough and perhaps to spare. Are they absolutely certain? If they are, what becomes of my consistency? If they are not, what is the use of making them?

I do not pretend that any one of these statements is absolutely certain. If it were so, it would not require me to advocate its truth on the present occasion. That a measure of certainty has still to be made good is implied in the very fact of my taking all this trouble to win your assent to what I have to say.

But vary your question a little and see what a different answer

you will get. Ask me not what the truths are in themselves, certain or uncertain, but what my state of mind is regarding them. Am I absolutely certain that I am speaking the truth? Yes, I am. Like many another man who has made bold assertions, and subsequently been found in error, I take my risk. But I could not take it with more willingness, nor with less hesitation. In that sense, and in that sense only, can I claim to be absolutely certain.

Will you forgive me if for a brief moment I indulge in a chapter of what I venture to call my philosophical biography? My only excuse for doing this is that I know of no other way of illustrating the obscure statement which has just been made.

Long ago it was borne in upon me by a series of painful experiences that the Author of my being was bent upon compelling me to face a certain intellectual risk, or rather risks, for there were many of them. I did not understand at the time that this was a most beneficent arrangement. I thought it was unkindly done and tried to escape from it. But by no manner of means could I succeed. Do what I would to find a position of absolute safety, I was continually haunted by the sense of my own fallibility, so that whenever I found a position that seemed to be safe, the thought instantly occurred that perhaps I had made a mistake. In this distress I had recourse to the various infallible systems which had come into existence for the express purpose of relieving distress such as mine and which continue to exist by the support of people in my then condition. But I soon found that the authors of these systems were almost as fallible as I was myself. It was the old difficulty of trying to prove your personal identity by the witness of people whose identity is just as much in question as your own. So that had to be given up. Then somebody advised me to trust my own reason and look to that for guidance, assuring me that I should thus reduce my risks to a minimum. This, like most young men, I was very willing to do, and I well remember the self-satisfaction with which I entered on the undertaking. But the self-satisfaction was of short duration. A wholly unexpected difficulty presented itself. I soon found out that the thing I trusted, and took for my reason, was very frequently nothing of the sort. In the name of reason I

began making the most foolish, the most childish mistakes. "Reason no doubt is a very good guide," I said to myself, "provided you know when you are reasonable. But this is precisely what nobody knows. Such is the frailty of man that many a one who thinks he is trusting to reason, is in reality on the point of becoming insane." And, looking round, I saw a multitude of men who in the name of reason were doing the maddest things under the sun. So thus, instead of minimizing my risks, I found I had increased them to a maximum: that also had to be given up.

Next I turned my attention to various philosophers. I understood them all fairly well but liked some of them far better than others. At last I found one who seemed to me to have the root of the matter within him. And so I still think he had; but he was unfortunately obsessed by the passion for absolute certainty, and in order to gratify it he ran out his thought into a perfect knife-edge of dialectical subtlety so fine that the least error in the understanding or even in the emphasis of a single word was attended with the most appalling consequences. If that philosopher had been more modest, or less ambitious, I should have remained his disciple to this day. But as it was he caused me to feel that the fate of the universe hung upon a breath; his certainties became synonyms for everything that was most precarious; and at last I literally ran away from him after a frightful fit of panic, caused by trying to balance myself on the knife-edge of his dialectic.

At this point things began to grow very black all round me. Universal skepticism was not far off, and began to beckon me on with a promise of freedom from every kind of intellectual risk. Nor was I long in yielding to the promise. But in all my life I was never less sure of anything than I was of my universal skepticism. I soon realized that of all my experiments this was quite the most disastrous. As I groped about in the confusion it seemed to me that instead of escaping danger I had found my way into the breeding-place of all the risks before which human spirits cower and quail. The very air was tainted—tainted with the spirit of cowardice; for the place was crowded with people who, like myself, had run away from the risks of life. We were

all cowards there; there was not a man among us who was not secretly ashamed of himself, so that I verily believe a more feeble or miserable crew was nowhere to be found under the wide compass of the heavens. Nevertheless, on looking back, I am glad to have been there. I learned some lessons that have served me well. I learned, for example, that this world is so arranged that skulkers always get the worst of it—I got the worst of it myself. I learned that running away from one's risks is precisely the way to encounter them in their most overwhelming form. I saw what an essentially ignoble thing the cult of safety is. I saw that its devotees are of all men the least secure and the most unhappy. I saw that I must face my risk once and for all, if I would be a man.

The rest can be briefly told. Bitter experience had taught me that the quest for absolute safety—which is the same thing as the quest for absolute certainty—is the most surely self-defeating of all human enterprises. I saw that the will of man, as well as his intellect, is involved in this affair; that there is a will to doubt as well as a will to believe; and it became very plain to me that many of the doubts which are most ventilated have their origin in nothing better than a love of argument and a desire to prove other people in the wrong; and that many notable skeptics, with a great reputation for impartiality, have deliberately manufactured the whole body of their unbelief.

Such were my conclusions. But I am far from professing that they were absolutely certain, or that they are so now. There is not one of them for which I would not welcome further evidence, and I hope to continue the search for it as long as I live. But though I am not absolutely certain of these things, I am more certain of them than I am of anything else. Life is a choice among difficulties. We have to stake our existence on something. Let us be content therefore to choose the risk which has the better reasons on its side. I say "the better" reasons, and these are seldom the most numerous, and they are never the most plausible. If you go on the principle of merely counting heads you will always find that doubts are in the majority. But it doesn't follow that they ought to rule. Perhaps they are there to be ruled. At all events we shall do well to allow a certain

principle of aristocracy to guide us in this critical choice. Let us choose our risk in terms of quality rather than number. Perhaps the biggest risk of all is precisely that one which it most becomes our manhood to choose. Better be wrong with the eagles than right with the owls. Better the real danger of the mountain heights than the spurious safety of a hole in the rocks. Better far the tragedy of the cross or the hemlock-cup than the slow putrefaction of a soul which has surrendered the noblest of human rights,—the right to purifying pain, the right to suffer for the cause! If fall we must, let us fall with the loyal. Absolutely certain? No! But tell me, if you can, of anything that is more certain than this.

The world has never fully made up its mind as to what it expects of philosophers. I have often thought that one reason why philosophers have not done more for mankind is that mankind has never clearly stated what it wishes the philosophers to do. Philosophy after all is a social function. Philosophers exist not merely by the toleration but by the connivance of society. Their office, like that of the doctors, the lawyers, and the statesmen, corresponds to the demand for some sort of service; the difference being that while the demands on the others are perfectly definite, no one seems to know exactly what this particular function is. No profession suffers so much from the vagueness of the demands that are made upon it. It is as though a patient came to a doctor and said: "Something serious is the matter with me, but I don't know what. There is a pain somewhere, but I cannot tell you whether it is in the head, the heart, the foot, or the hand. I cannot describe my symptoms. Nevertheless I expect you to discover the disease and to provide the remedy."

I am not here to plead for philosophers. I will only suggest that some of their more serious failings are due to the constant vagueness and the occasional absurdity of the demands which the public make upon them. Not knowing exactly what society expects them to do, they are only too ready to take any hint, no matter how unenlightened the source may be from which the hint proceeds. Thus many of them have embarked on the quest for absolute certainty simply because absolute certainty is what

a thoughtless section of the public asked for. Another demand, equally thoughtless but somewhat more pathetic, comes from that bewildered class in the community who, at the present day, are crying out for positive construction. Yielding to this there are some philosophers who have deliberately set themselves the task of constructing the truth. Some have even gone the length of what they call "constructing experience." You might as well try to construct a living soul. I cannot repress a suspicion that these philosophers, among whom are to be found some of the greatest intellects, have been taken in. They have not paused to reflect that the very persons who are crying out for construction will be the first to knock the constructions to pieces. They always have done so, they always will. We are making a very great mistake if we suppose that the will to doubt will ever be appeased by feeding it with constructions. I have had some experience with these would-be constructive thinkers, and my impression is that they are the most rapidly disillusioned class among all those who are now handling the things of the spirit. They are fighting their battles on ground which has been chosen for them by the enemy.

The chief service which philosophy can render seems to me of another kind. Unfortunately the service is one of which few of us perceive we have need; and even when the need is revealed to us, we are none too anxious to confess it. We are all the victims of many illusions, and the best philosopher, if I am not mistaken, is precisely he who helps us to get rid of them. Philosophy is not the process of teaching the blind to see; still less does it make eyes to see with. Its function is rather to push aside the veils and tear off the bandages and destroy the unnecessary spectacles with which we obscure and distort our own vision. In setting out to explain the universe, I think philosophy has been too ambitious. A more modest programme would be more successful: that, for example, of teaching us so to think as not to prevent the universe explaining itself. The universe is not as dependent on us for its elucidation as we are apt to think. If we were a little less eager to tell the universe what we think about it, and a little more willing to hear what the universe thinks about us; if we would admit, occasionally at all events, that there are some things in the uni-

verse that can not only take care of themselves, but take care of us as well, I think we should all learn more in the long run and come out better philosophers in the end.

There are many voices in the world; and the voice of man is only one of them. There are many voices in each of us; the voice of our argumentative faculty is only one of them. All these voices claim attention; all are worth hearing; all have something important to say. None of them can claim an exclusive right to declare the truth. The witness which truth requires is in the harmony of them all. But our philosophy has been too much of a monologue; the logician has silenced the other speakers and done all the talking himself. But there is nothing the head can say which does not evoke an answer from the heart. To every thought which the thinker utters concerning life, life replies by a reaction, by a comment; and the answering comment thus provoked is fully as significant, nay, often vastly more significant, than the thought which provoked it. The universe is apt at repartee, especially when a philosopher is talking. A true philosophy would recognize this. It would give all voices a hearing. It would let the universe have its say. It would become a dialogue. History and metaphysics would converse across the table. Concrete life and abstract thought would talk to one another. Logician, poet, man of action; the head, the heart, and the hand; the reason, the imagination, and the will,—all these would speak, and each would be as eager to hear the other as he was to utter himself. What a running commentary on life such conversations would be! How much richer than the monologues in which we now indulge! It is thus, perhaps, that angels and purified spirits philosophize, and such things may never be in this world of vain contentions and loud disputes. Yet, even here and now, those other voices cannot be utterly silenced. They do answer. They do compel us to listen. We work ourselves to the fever heat of eloquence and are on the point of clinching our argument, when suddenly another voice breaks in. "Be still," it says, "be still and know that I am God."